



# THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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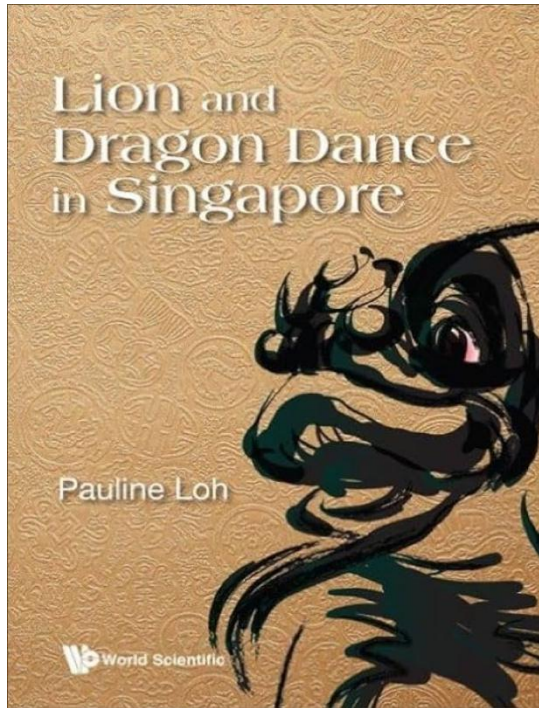
## **From the Zhou Dynasty Onwards, a Chinese Cultural Phenomenon in Singapore and Beyond**

*Lion and Dragon Dance in Singapore* by Pauline Loh (Singapore: World Scientific, 2023), 209 pages, SGD 30.

**L**ion and Dragon Dances are the highpoints of Chinese festivals, deeply rooted in tradition and performed during Chinese New Year and other important occasions, symbolizing courage, strength, and good luck. Dancers adorned in colorful lion costumes mimic the movements of the lion, accompanied by the beat of drums, cymbals, and gongs. The dragon dance, with its long and intricately designed dragon puppet manipulated by a team of skilled performers, represents power, wisdom, and prosperity. The dances denote Chinese heritage that has lasted for centuries and fosters a sense of unity among communities across the world.

In her book, Pauline Loh presents a comprehensive account of the origin of these dance forms in the 1850s, performed by troupes in Singapore since the 1930s, and how they became an integral part of the city-state's culture. Through sections on history, culture, and sport, the

author locates the dance in the context of Singapore's modern society and contemporary events. The author discusses the continuity of the dance in the future through the cooperation of Chinese communities in the country and overseas branches as well.



### **Folklore and History**

The first section of the book encompasses the folklore associated with lions and dragons, and how they became an integral part of Chinese culture. The author presents a historical account of how the dance form continued during colonial times in Singapore as a means for people to reconnect with their cultural roots, by remembering the pioneers of prominent dance troupes and the dancers who carried forward their legacy.

The legend of the mythical lion as a guardian started when *Nián* 年 (p.10), an unidentified monster in the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE to 256



BCE) terrorized villagers during the Lunar New Year. The author explains that they were protected by the lion, its appearance inspiring a costume made of bamboo and paper that the villagers used to drive away the *Nián* with loud noise and red banners representing fire. The peace that followed led to the annual celebration of the lion dance, and its performance at important occasions. Along with this, there are tales of the mischievous lion of the Jade Emperor, and how the Emperor of the Song Province was victorious when Tan He, the governor of Jiao Zhou, intimidated an opposing army by dressing the soldiers as monstrous lions. The author mentions Luo Guanzhong's novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which is one of four greatest classical works in Chinese literature. It tells the story of six brave soldiers, Liu Bei, Guan Ye, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun, Huang Zhong, and Ma Chao who were later known as Emperor Liu Bei and the five Tiger Generals. They are represented by costumes based on their individual characteristics and qualities.

These examples demonstrate the lion as a symbol of power and strength in Chinese culture, even though it is not a part of the native fauna. The author traces its presence back to the commonly accepted belief that lions were introduced by the Silk Route between 220 BCE to 207 BCE by Western merchants. They were accompanied by dancers who were probably inspired by the creatures presented by the emperors. The author fascinatingly points out that the Chinese lions look different from the species as the activities in the royal court were not accessible to the general public. So, their knowledge of these intriguing creatures was supplemented by the animals that were common to them, as the Northern lions look similar to Pekingese dogs, while the Southern lions are modeled on the appearance and actions of household cats, which were animals more common to them.

The author further explains that dragons in Chinese lore are vastly different from their Western counterparts, who are known to be malevolent creatures that were needed to be slain by heroes. Chinese dragons have been seen as protectors since the Han Dynasty and have immense significance in ancient Chinese cosmology for maintaining cosmic balance. They also appear in the story of Yangdi and Huangdi who are regarded as the ancestors of the Chinese. Their actions are believed to bring rain that sustains life on Earth. They are often associated with other powerful mythical creatures such as the Fenghuang (Phoenix) and the Tiger. Hence, their importance transcends the aspects of nobility, bravery, and good fortune.

With this background, the author offers an anecdote in the third chapter on how dance troupes emerged in the Straits Settlements. It is believed that in the 1850s, there was a Chinese temple committee member who suggested the idea of a *Wushu* group to a temple devotee, so that it could be a space for young people to be a part of the temple's social activities. This was an ideal way for Chinese immigrants to remain connected to the homeland, as they had come to Singapore in search of employment, and soon there were many who joined clan associations based on their native dialect. The author mentions the other side of it, as it led to the formation of secret societies, gangsterism, and religious disputes, seen in less favorable light by the local families. However, the dance became extremely popular and the Singapore Infopedia presents a timeline of the dance forms being practiced in the 1900s by Chinese immigrants. It gained more traction when a silk lion costume was bought by the Fuzhou Woodwork Association who promoted a dragon dance form that is popular across the world today.



The third chapter explains that the dance went into decline during the Second World War when Singapore became Syonan-to under Japanese occupation and violence was rampantly meted out to the locals. Despite the uncertainties and performances being halted, the troupes remained and many of its pioneers believe it was the guardian lion protecting the people that helped them rebuild the Lion City.

The connection to the *Jia Xiang* (hometown) has developed into a cultural phenomenon in Singapore. The re-emergence of the dance troupes began in the post-Second World War period, along with the

formation of new troupes such as the Singapore Chin Woo Lion Dance Troupe, the Guang Wu Club, and the Sam Sui Wui Koon Singapore Lion Dance Troupe. The 1950s was a significant time for the troupes, as they began designing their own costumes that were unique to their performers. This was the time when the elders of the Hok San Clan Association Dance Troupe collectively changed the fierce-looking lion to make it more appealing to viewers. Some of the improvements included: changing of the lion's black eyebrows to white, and reducing its length from 12 feet to 6 feet.

The dance troupes began fundraising and community service. They gained more traction after Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew attended an anniversary dinner in 1966 at Nanyang Siau Lim National Art Federation and proposed that an official foundation be organized for uniting the pugilistic community. As a result, the Singapore National Pugilistic Federation was formed in 1967 with an extravagant lion and dragon dance performance over eight days at Gay World in the same year. The federation is now known as Singapore Lion and Dragon Federation or Wuzong.

The year 1967 was important for another reason, as there was a performance with a glow-in-the-dark dragon at the inaugural event of Singapore's national pugilistic competition. It was the first of its kind and was the concept of the Nanyang Shaolin Movement Centre. The 1960s also paved the way for the immense popularity of the lion and dragon dance troupes as it was a consequence of economic development in the country, and the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board had a key role in it. Now known as the Singapore Tourism Board, it provides opportunities to dance troupes to showcase their talent at local tourist attractions. These vignettes highlight the contribution of the dance in the multi-ethnic cultural environment of Singapore.



### **The Dance in Contemporary Singapore**

In this dynamic and ever-evolving scenario, the author discusses the factors that have influenced the dance. The 1980s marked a new era in lion and dragon dance as there was a new generation of dancers who wanted to create a distinct identity from the martial arts associated with it. This led to the formation of groups from the 1980s right until the 2000s. By the 1990s, there were competitions held separately from Gay World, which was the original location since the first *wushu*. These were the Ngee Ann City National Lion Dance Championship in 1995, and the International Lion Dance Competition held annually in Chinatown during Chinese New Year.

The period of the twenty-first century, from 2000-2019, can be distinguished as a time of national and international awards won by individual dance troupes. The most notable among them were the two Guinness Book of World Records. The first was for the largest gathering of dancing dragons with ten dancers per dragon, while the second was for the largest lion dance performance. The record for the latter was 329

lions, but in 2019, there was a gathering of 720 lions at Marina Bay because the theme was to celebrate 720 years of the discovery of the Lion City by Sang Nila Utama in the year 1299.

The situation during the Covid-19 pandemic was especially hard for the dance troupes during the Lunar New Year, as this is the time they earn the *cai qing* commissions that finance their activities throughout the year. The pandemic halted the annual competitions such as the International Lion and Dragon Dance Competition in Chinatown and the Ngee Ann City National Lion Dance Championship. It was also detrimental to the smaller dance troupes as they were unable to manage the financial constraints. The author states that the situation can be described as the “period of the 睡狮 (Shuìshī; sleeping lion)” (p. 35). This was followed by the Lunar New Year in 2021, with limited participation of dance troupes, however the troupes began showcasing their talent on social media platforms, which increased their popularity among international audiences.

Being a part of a dance troupe is accompanied by a certain set of values that its performers have inculcated into their lives. As the dance forms have their origin in martial arts, self-discipline and constant training are a prerequisite for the performers. This serves as a basis for the principle that martial arts should be used for personal health, which is evident from their respective rules. Wen Yang’s mission statement explains this: “Without proper training, the lion will be without expression, the dragon will be without motion, and the drum will be without rhythm” (p. 84). Among the various rules, the essential values consist of fraternal bonds among the dancers, patriotism, and character development of its performers, derived from the Chinese Five Constants and Four Values of Confucianism. Troupes such as the Kong Chow Wui



Koon Kungfu Dragon & Lion Troupe (“饮水思源 (Yǐnshuǐsīyuán,” p.84), and Qing Wei Lion & Dragon Dance Cultural Troupe’s idea of an extended family, are striking examples of this strong sense of an ethnic identity in Singapore and around the world.

This section gives a concise explanation about how the dance forms developed over the years and how they gained prominence among the Chinese community in Singapore. The author also outlines important historical events associated with the tradition, the skill of its leaders who have developed aspects of the dance forms, and their general practices, making it an ideal introduction to the book.

### **Culture in Motion**

In the second section titled “Culture,” the author begins by describing the different types of lion and dragon species used for the dances, which highlight the diversity of the dance form and the creativity used.

The Southern Lion, one of the most popular lion species resembling a household cat, is known for its cheerful expressions.

The Singapore Lion has two styles, the Foshan (Buddha Mountain) and Heshan (Crane Mountain) lions named after the places they originated from before they became a part of the “ceremonial lions” used in the National Day Parade in Singapore (p. 96).

The Northern Lion is decorated with red and yellow fur, and its performances are usually conducted with a pair of male and female lions, which make it suitable for weddings.

The Green Lion from Fujian in southeast China has a flat face with fierce looking canines whose origins lie in the Qing dynasty, whose rulers, the Manchus, had a reputation of usurpers in China.

The Green Face Sword Lion is separate from the green lion and emerged at the end of the Manchu reign, where Gan De Yuan paraded the

lion in Quanzhou and removed its blade eyebrows, which signified the end of the empire.

The Wen Lion that is part of the Tang Dynasty and is known for the peace desired by people during the war years.

The Japan Lion comes from a country known for its 9,000 varieties of lion dances, and is a species to which people willingly offer their babies' heads to be bitten by the lion for good luck.

The Korean Lion has sub-species such as the *sajach'um* performed for masked dramas, while the *saja-noreum* is used to drive away evil spirits.

The Tibet Lion featured on the Tibetan flag and currency as it is symbolic of happiness and fearlessness. Its dance is performed for secular occasions but there is also a Buddhist dance ritual depicting snow lions protecting the Buddha's throne.

The Vietnam Lion is similar to the Southern Lion due to its colors, and is performed during the Vietnamese Lunar Year and the Tet Festival.

The Thailand Lion maintains the tradition of the Southern Lion dance, which is generally performed during Lunar New Year and the inauguration of new businesses.

The Indonesia Lion dances vary from region to region and are known as the *barongsai*. Among these, there is the *Reog* dance in Java, where dancers carry a lion mask weighing 30 kg to 40 kg with their teeth. With its length being 2.5 meters, it is the world's largest mask.

The author describes a number of dragons, such as the Southern Dragon belonging to the area south of the Yangtze River in China; the Northern Dragon that appears at competitions held in Singapore, China, Hong Kong, and Malaysia; the Fuzhou Dragon brought to Singapore by Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century; the Luminous Dragon that is native to Singapore and was performed at the inaugural national

pugilistic competition in 1967; the Fire Dragon that receives its name from the candles and oil lamps that are placed inside its body; the Lotus Dragon covered in scales that look like lotus petals that might have its origins in Chongqing, China; and the Bench Dragon which comes from the Ming Dynasty in China and is performed during the Lantern Festival, where the head of the Bench Dragon is crafted and taken around a village.



The author concludes this section by exploring the tradition of long dragons. It is believed that the longer the dragon is, the more prosperity it brings. Therefore, there are constant attempts by countries to establish world new records in creating the longest dragon. The current record for

the longest dragon of 5,605 meters, set in 2012, belongs to the Hong Kong Chinese Martial Arts Dragon and Lion Association.

### **Crafting the Lion and Dragon**

In the next chapter, the author explains the process of crafting lion and dragon dance costumes. This practice is defined by a Chinese proverb, “When you paint a dragon, dot the eyes” (p. 110), meaning that finishing touches should be added to achieve perfection. This is connected to the story of Zhang Seng You, a famous artist in the Liang Dynasty, who was supposed to paint a mural at Anle temple in Jinling, and he did a good job with making the dragons look realistic. As the story goes, he did not paint the eyes of the dragons. When he was asked about it, he explained that the eyes provided its life force, making it fly away from the painting. To prove it, he painted the eyes of two dragons which came alive and ascended into the heavens. Today, painting the dragon’s eyes is conducted by a ceremony called *diǎnjīng*, or “eye dotting” which is symbolic of transforming the costume into a spiritual being.

The first step in the process is to create the structure of the lion head with smoothened bamboo strips which are set in spherical arrangement, with openings for its eyes. This is done according to the type of lion being crafted. Its ears are small flaps that are attached to the mainframe and its lower jaw is fixed separately for it to be moveable. The bamboo frame is covered with a thin cloth and then paper. This creates a durable shell that can be painted according to different requirements. Several coats are applied on it and then it is adorned with various decorative items. The author explains that Henry Ng, one of the few remaining costume masters in Singapore and a dancer of the Singapore Hok San Association, has designed lion costumes since 1995. He believes



in the individuality of his designs and strives to maintain it, which in turn brings him a lot of satisfaction when they are used in performances.



A dragon's body consists of two parts—the head and the tail—and its size can range between 14 meters to 54 meters. They are also sectioned between odd numbers till 29, which are fixed on poles used by the dancers. The materials used for constructing a dragon decides its name, such as *Zhǐ lóng* (paper), *Zhú lóng* (bamboo), and *Bù lóng* (cloth). For night performances, some dragons are designed for holding candles. These are known as dragon lanterns or *Lóng dēng*. They are now used with LED lights and fluorescent paint for safety measures. The dragon head has a noticeable snout, stag-like horns, and a distinct jaw, with its tongue and teeth that are fashioned separately. Its eyes are drawn with concentric rings and are outlined with flames, making it fiery. A red beard completes its look, which denotes wisdom and virility.

## Aspects of Performances

The tenth chapter then explains the various aspects of the lion and dragon dance performances. It begins with the *diǎnjīng*, which is the eye-dotting ceremony that is meant to animate the costumes and make people regard them as divine beings. The words uttered during the ceremony are representative of their strength, majestic appearance, and divinity. The main act of a lion dance is the *Cài qīng* which is to pluck the green, and is symbolic of good luck and spring. This makes it ideal for Chinese New Year and inaugural events. The greens are suspended from a high place and this is known as *Gāo qīng* or the “high greens,” or vegetables and fruits can be placed on the ground, which is known as *Dì Qīng*.

The second practice is more creative as the vegetables are placed like a puzzle which needs to be solved by the lion. This is meant to narrate stories about how the lion overcomes challenges and it is symbolic for inaugurations as it removes obstacles that may hamper the growth of a business. The lion dancers then go on to shred the greens to show the lion eating them, which would then be grabbed by the audience for blessings. Along with symbolic practices, the dance also highlights the skill and abilities of its dances.

Other types of lion dances include wedding lion dances, LED lion dances, and the practice of “mounting the peak.” The wedding lions, also known as the *Shuāngxǐ*, meaning “double happiness,” are favored by many because they present banners with wishes for the married couple, and the bride and groom wear *hanfu* to add to the occasion.

The author writes that for dragon dances there is usually a team of nine or more dancers that manipulate the structure of the dragon. There are more than twenty stances in a dragon dance that requires extensive practice from its dancers. In dragon dances, there are the acts



of “chasing the pearl,” and “Cloud cave and whirlpool,” where dancers display their skills.



### The Symbolisms

In the thirteenth chapter, the author draws the reader’s attention to additional aspects that make lions and dragons unique. These are the symbolisms present in their colors, numbers, and homophones. The lion is one of the five celestial beasts of Daoism, which is why its forehead looks similar to a dragon, while its tail resembles a *Qílín* or a Chinese unicorn. The other feature similarities are the hump with concentric circles of a celestial tortoise with a snake wrapped around it that continues into its tail, the horn, which is the topknot of the phoenix, and its teeth are fashioned like that of a tiger.

The author explains that the number 9 is often associated with dragons, and that its name, “Jiu,” which means immortal in Chinese is used often to name places. Other homophone symbolisms include *Cái qíng*, which is linked to the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE). The Chinese frequently rebelled against the rule of the Manchus and the act of *Cái qíng* emerged as an act of patriotism at martial art schools. Today the act is associated with lettuce which is called *Shēngcài* in Chinese. Fruits also have a lot of significance in this context.

Additional aspects of symbolism include colors based on the Daoist philosophy of the Theory of Five Colors, and lions and dragons are mostly designed in yellow and red, as they denote exuberance and prosperity. White lions were associated with funerals and when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew passed in 2015, white lions bowed in respect to his cortège. After the funeral procession, the lions burned according to Chinese customs. The color is gaining more traction in the modern times due to the use of LED lights in the lion and dragon costumes.

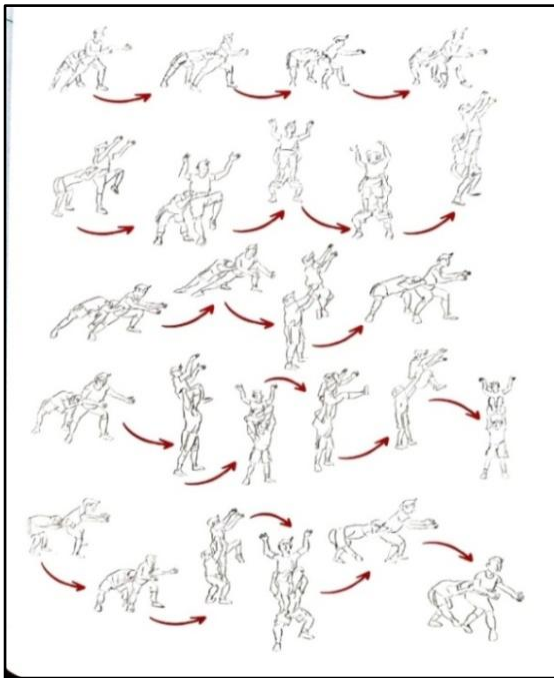
The author explains the depictions of lions assigned to the three protagonists of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, as their story is widely popular in China. The Liu Bei Lion is yellow in color, indicating royal lineage as he went on to become the ruler of the Shu Han dynasty, the Guan Yu lion is designed with red and a long black beard as it denotes virility and skill in the battlefield, and the Zhang Fei lion is black with white trimmings.

This section covers a wide spectrum of concepts and ideas that make lion and dragon dances unique across Northeast and Southeast Asia. It reflects the creativity of dance troupes when it comes to using their imagination for creating vibrant and stunning costumes befitting the spiritual identity of these mythical beings.



## Martial Arts and Acrobatics

The third section of the book titled “Sport” constitutes a chapter on training. There are just a few written manuals that provide systemic guidance on lion and dragon dances as most of it is imparted orally by instructors. The only one in English is the *Lion Dancer Development: A Strength and Conditioning Program to Develop the Athletic Lion Dancer* by Truc Nyugen-Pham, who is a lion dancer and she provides theoretical information on its application. The Lion and Dragon Dance have stances that are taught to the dancers. These are the Horse Stance, Cat Stance, Arrow Stance, Unicorn Stance, and the Crane Stance. There are additional stunts such as the hop, high jump, the ball shape stance of the head dancer, and the lap stance. All of these are depicted in the image below.



The important aspect of coordination is highlighted by Francis Wong of the Kong Chow Wui Koon lion dance troupe, who says, “Every

member must learn the different roles before they specialise in one based on their talents. . . . Lion dance requires precise coordination and chemistry between the team members. It boils down to practice, practice, and more practice” (p.175).

This section provides clarity on the training routines and the discipline maintained by the troupe members. This ensures that the dancers inculcate the values required for the dance forms and get accustomed to the martial arts associated with them.

### **What Lies Ahead?**

The fourth and final section of the book, “The Future,” begins with a chapter on the presence of lion and dragon dances in Chinese culture and the world. As discussed earlier, lion and dragon dance activities are known for being a co-curricular activity (CCA) for schools and community clubs in Singapore for physical health and improving their interpersonal abilities.

Competitions are important for shining the spotlight on various troupes and many events are organized in Singapore and other countries. One such event was the Genting World Lion Dance which had over thirteen countries participating in it. The author also mentions the practice of lion and dragon dances by Chinese immigrant communities globally and the impact of the dances in popular culture. There many examples in films like *Rivals of Kung Fu* (1974), where the lion dance is performed by female lion dancers, *Martial Club* (1981), *The Young Master* (1990) and *Once Upon a Time in China* trilogy (1991-1993) as well as books such as *Sam, Sebbie, Di-Di-Di: The Lion Dance*, which is a picture book and the *Leopop Trilogy*, by the author, Pauline Loh, which was published by Epigram for young adults.



The lion and dragon dances have inspired numerous examples of art by local and renowned artists, and the author has cited the works of Yip Yew Chong, Sim-Mei Ann, Grace Cong Lie, and Cai Tse in this section.

The author concludes by presenting a perspective on lion and dragon dance traditions in the future. The dances have evolved and adapted over the decades in Singapore, and have overcome the challenges posed by colonial domination, widespread opium addictions, and a pandemic. This has provided the people with a sense of optimism and fostered their national identity. Therefore, there have been several attempts for inclusion of new recruits from schools and colleges, and the increased participation of women. For the latter, the author mentions Gund Kwok, which prides itself on being “the only Asian Women Lion and Dragon Dance Troupe in the United States” (p.200), the Lion Dance Me Club in San Francisco, and Lynn Wong, who is the female ambassador for Kong Chow Woo Kun. For the way forward, the author emphasizes the need to set up more overseas branches of dance troupes, finding the right balance between the views of the traditionalists and modernists, taking cognizance of online modes of outreach that emerged during the coronavirus pandemic, increased interactions between the older and younger generations, and preserving historical nuances of the dances to maintain Singapore’s intangible cultural heritage.

The book is a comprehensive guide for lion and dragon dance in the context of Singapore and how it has become an integral part of the national heritage. The author has collected the relevant information from various sources that encompasses every aspect of the dances, such as its cultural origins and several symbolisms, while showcasing the hard work, creativity, and dedication of the dancers, and presented it in a lucid manner. This not only makes the book an ideal tribute to the dances

while providing clarity on how it can maintain continuity in the future, but it also makes vital information accessible to readers of all ages.

*Photo credit: Rising Asia Journal gratefully acknowledges the photographers, Calvin Ling and Tan Kok Hon, for their permission to use the images published in this review essay.*

### ***Note on the Reviewer***

**Mohini Maureen Pradhan** is an independent scholar who holds BA and MA degrees in English Language and Literature from Loreto College, Kolkata. Her research interests are in history, mythology, art, music, and cinema. She has an article on the works of the Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist and poet, Michael Ondaatje, in a forthcoming book from Routledge. She is an Assistant Editor for the *Rising Asia Journal* and has written a paper on “Feminism and Human Rights,” published on [webplatform4dialogue.net](http://webplatform4dialogue.net). She has co-authored the paper, “Power and the Archive in the works of William Somerset Maugham,” that traces the concept of the archive by Jacques Derrida and the power relationship between the characters of Maugham. Both papers were collaborative efforts co-authored with her classmates at Loreto College.